



SHADES OF TERROR

LARRY A. LEVITAN

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To Neta, Lyonne and Oryan

1

BROTHERHOOD

It was close to dawn but the back alley streets were still covered in darkness. A door opened and five men stepped into the back alley of a Brooklyn neighborhood. Two of the men were speaking Arabic and judging by their voice levels, it seemed they were engaged in a heated conversation.

“Why don’t you calm down? I can’t reason with you when you’re in this state,” said one of the men.

“How can I calm down? All along I had the feeling that this is what you were planning, but you know...somehow I still believed that I was mistaken and that we hoped to change the world through a peaceful engagement. Any Muslim knows that violence opposes everything our religion stands for and that it’s not the will of Allah to carry out missions of this kind,” replied the second man.

“Feisal, you knew exactly what you were getting into. Don’t act so surprised...you know we’re not the Boy Scouts,” defended the first man.

“I didn’t know shit, you kept me all the time in the dark about your true plans, and now I know why. But now that I overheard you speak about them, I can’t keep still and I have to make sure we stop pursuing this outrageous plan. How can we as people, who abide by the laws and teaching of Islam, decide to betray everything the Koran stands for? A large portion of the world already looks upon us with disgust and believes that every Muslim is a terrorist,” said Feisal.

“What do you care about the rest of the world? The only thing you should care about is to teach all those infidels a lesson they can’t forget.”

“Well, haven’t we already done that with 9/11? But as you can see the lesson hasn’t been well received and now we are facing pressure from all sides. Muslim religion has become synonymous with terrorism and each Arab is now in the eyes of the world an Islamic extremist. How can you even think that what you are planning is in the name of Allah? No person in their right mind would think that.”

There was a brief moment of silence as both men tried to gather their composure. “I can see there’s nothing I can say or do to convince you otherwise,” said the man.

“No Jamal, I cannot be part of this any longer...I am ashamed that you all believe you are doing the right thing,” Feisal waved his arm at the other men. “My brothers I urge you to reconsider and return to the righteous path of Islam.” He had a pleading look on his face.

“Don’t patronize us; we all made our choice a long time ago and are content with it. If we can’t convince you, that by joining our cause, you fulfill a great and honorable deed to all your Muslim brothers, then we have to cut you loose.”

“Yes, I think that’s probably the best for all of us. I thank you for understanding that my way of Islam is very different from yours and that I can’t follow you down the path you have decided to pursue.”

“My dearest Feisal, it saddens me to hear that you decided not to follow the path your brothers have chosen and which you promised to follow to the end when you joined us. I cannot say that I agree with your decision, but that I respect your choice. Let us part as friends and brothers and keep in mind that our friendship shouldn’t suffer from your change of heart and that we shared many blissful memories. As your friend, I ask you to keep our plans to yourself and not to betray our friendship and trust and that of your fellow brothers in faith.” Jamal spread out his arms in a gesture of forgiveness, inviting Feisal to come closer.

Feisal smiled and stepped closer. Both men embraced and in that moment Feisal felt a sharp pain in his left chest area. He looked at Jamal in disbelief, his eyes wide open in shock as he tried to cry out, but Jamal placed his hand over his mouth, suffocating any sound he tried to utter. He felt the world going dark around him, his thoughts were rushing to try and comprehend the situation. His lungs were burning and he needed to breathe, but he couldn’t. He was fainting and his legs weren’t able to hold his weight any longer and he knew in that moment that he was dying. The last thing he felt was a second sharp pain in his chest before he collapsed with his final breath. Feisal didn’t feel the third knife stab to his stomach. Jamal looked around to see if someone had witnessed what happened, but the back alley was empty on both ends. He then removed Feisal’s wallet and watch and turned to the others who were watching him. He could tell from their expressions that they were still in shock from what they had witnessed.

“What have you done,” shouted Rashid, one of the men, “You killed him. He was one of us,” he said and knelt down to feel his pulse. When he shook his head, the others knew he was dead.

“Snap out of it...It had to be done or he would have taken us all down. If you think for one moment that we could have let him go, then you don’t understand what you have signed up for. I demand of every one of you to kill me on the spot the second I change my mind or try to leave the group,” said Jamal.

“What shall we do now?” asked Rashid, panicked at the idea that someone would walk by and see four men standing over a lifeless body.

“Help me put him in the dumpster,” ordered Jamal. The other two men each grabbed an arm and Jamal grabbed both feet as they threw the dead body into the dumpster.

“We can’t leave him here, someone will find the body and the police will link it right away to us,” said Rashid, who had digested the initial shock.

“You’re right,” agreed Jamal. “We need to get rid of the body. Go get the car,” he said to one of the men. “We’ll throw him in the trunk and dump his body into the Hudson. He doesn’t have any family or friends that will miss him. If his body is found, there will be no evidence linking him to us.” The men quickly vanished through the back door. There wasn’t much time until the break of dawn and people would start crowding the streets. They had to get rid of the body as fast as possible.

MEET JOHN KRAMER

John Kramer woke up to the sirens of a fire truck rushing through the streets. It was as if the sounds he heard in his dreams turned real. It took him a few minutes to realize that he wasn't dreaming any longer and that he was lying on his couch still dressed in his clothes. His eyes were still shut and he struggled to open them, but it took a tremendous effort. He managed to sit himself up, still keeping his eyes closed, as he tried to shake off the fatigue. The TV was running in the background and he managed to listen partially to a narrator advertising some kind of Cholesterol lowering drug. Finally he managed to open his eyelids and grasp at his watch. It was a few minutes past 4 a.m. and he wished to have had more hours of uninterrupted sleep. Instinctively, he looked around to search for his cell phone. There were no missed calls, but the display indicated he had three new text messages. His apartment was a mess. Empty beer bottles and cans were scattered around the living room and floor and some had spilled onto the carpet. He looked at the nearly emptied bottle of Jack Daniels and the used tumblers on the couch table; at least he still possessed the manners to restrain himself from drinking out of the bottle. He picked up one of the half full beer bottles and took a sip. The beer was stale and he wanted to spit it out. Then his eyes moved to the full ashtray containing cigarette stubs and the remainders of several joints. One of the joints was only half smoked and he picked it up reaching for the lighter at the end of the table. He lit the joint and inhaled deeply, keeping the smoke in his lungs. The sudden rush of THC to his brain awoke him completely.

'This is good stuff,' he thought and he took another puff. A few close friends from his college days decided to drop by for a good time and besides the beer, they had brought with them some of the best weed money could buy. Not that he was into smoking pot on a regular basis, but sharing an occasional puff with the right crowd could be very satisfying. He was feeling lightheaded as he struggled to get up from the couch. He walked over to the kitchen. On the isle were two family sized boxes of Ray's Pizza he had ordered that evening to satisfy their munchies and he opened them to inspect their contents. He took out a slice, smelled it and looked at it disgustfully before putting it back, which made him realize that he actually never had liked Ray's Pizza. Their pizza always dripped from too much oil, but it was the only 24/7 pizza place in his neighborhood with home delivery and he couldn't always be too picky when hunger was calling. He took another puff, walked over to the sink, opened the tap and stubbed out the joint under the running

water. Looking into his fridge, he realized he hadn't shopped for groceries in weeks. The only shopping he did was at the liquor and convenience store at the corner on his block. Food was only a function of ordering take away from restaurants and fast food joints in his neighborhood. He grabbed the last jar of spring water and gulped down as much as he could manage in one take. 'Man this stuff makes you really thirsty,' he thought as he took another mouthful.

He was now too awake to go back to sleep and the amounts of booze and pot he consumed in last evening's session had made him wake up hungry.

'In three hours I must be at work,' he thought and then decided to begin the new day very early. Walking into the bathroom, he marveled at the smell of his clothes while getting undressed and mustered himself in the mirror. 'You are still a handsome guy,' he thought moving his chin from side to side to view his face from all angles. He turned 34 last January and apart from a few gained pounds, his body was still trim and in pretty good shape. The past few months at work hadn't left him with much time to hit the gym and he knew that he had to get hold of himself and return to his former workout routine. Once he would start working out again his eating habits would return to normal and he could abstain from all the fast food and booze. He grabbed at the barely present fat pads that started to build up around his waist. "You need to work out you lazy bastard," he shouted at himself, staring at the mirror. He turned on the cold water and splashed some onto his face. Then he took the tube of shaving cream and squeezed out just enough to ensure a clean shave. John insisted that shaving foam was for lazy people. After he finished shaving, he climbed into the shower, turned the faucet and simply enjoyed the warm water running down his face, neck and shoulders. He always brushed his teeth while showering and whenever possible stayed under the relaxing water stream for half an hour or longer.

'At least this room is tidy,' he thought walking into his bedroom and standing in his walk-in closet. He looked at the row of suits, neatly piled and starched shirts and large selection of silk ties. He loved ties; for him they were the only way a man could make a color statement without overstepping the dress code boundaries at his workplace. He picked out a dark grey Armani suit and matched it with a white button down shirt and a green paisley patterned silk tie. Suits were the standard attire for senior field agents at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and luckily he was able to afford the expensive brands. His sense of fashion was known in the ranks and over time, colleagues associated the three letter acronym FBI with "Fancy Boy Investigates" whenever he appeared on a crime scene. He didn't care, he actually enjoyed being eyed as the handsome colleague, certainly it helped him with the ladies, whether it be with his female colleagues at the agency or with women he met during his investigations. Women were much more responsive and helpful to a good looking and well-dressed man.

He gathered his working utensils from the top of his dresser. He preferred to carry his handgun in a fast draw waist holster. His preferred make was the Glock 35 with an extended barrel and extended line of sight, which gave him more accuracy, especially with rapid firing. It used .40-caliber cartridges and he used high capacity magazines carrying 29 rounds. He never wanted to find himself in a threat situation where he wished he had enough ammunition to defend himself. He gave himself a final approving nod, looking at the mirror before heading out to the living room. He shook his head looking at the mess, but couldn't keep himself from smiling as he recalled last evening's events. His buddies were a fun bunch and he was happy to have friends outside the law enforcement community that didn't talk shop when he was off the clock and who still occasionally mocked him for choosing to become a cop. He didn't worry too much about the mess as he wouldn't be cleaning it up anyway. Melanie, his housekeeper, would make the place sparkle again. He just hoped she wouldn't curse too much. It was just impossible to find a good housekeeper these days.

John stepped into the elevator to find a beautiful girl leaning against the wall with her head cocked to the side. She was tall and wore a short dress that showed off her long and slender legs, further accentuated by the high heels she was wearing. 'Probably Jimmy Choo's or Manolo Blahnik's,' he thought. Her blonde hair was pinned up and he wondered how it must have looked like when she had started the evening. She looked tired and exhausted, but even in this state she was breathtakingly good looking.

John smiled at her – "Long night?" he asked.

"Uh-huh, too long," she barely squeezed a smile into the sentence. There was not much more he could say to her in this situation, it wasn't the best timing to consider hitting on her, so he avoided further eye contact until they reached the ground floor. He would have to find out who she was and hope for another opportunity to get acquainted. He gallantly waved her out of the door and said in a soft voice, "Have a nice day."

She looked back at him, "Thanks, you too," she said and walked across the lobby towards the entrance.

John walked over to the reception, where Lou, the doorman, was still occupied staring at the girl as she headed out the door and turned left to disappear out of sight.

"What a fine looking lady," he said nodding his head in acknowledgment.

"I have to agree," responded John. "And that's why you are going to find out for me who she is."

Lou knew everything that went on in this building. He was a reliable source of information and up to date on the latest gossip on all the residents.

"Jenny Olson from 18F on the 25th floor, turned 28 yesterday. She gave me a list of all her friends she invited to her party. If I remember correctly her name's Laura Baxter."

John laughed, “Lou you always find ways to amaze me. Do you remember if she came alone or if she was with someone?” he asked.

Lou smiled mischievously, “She arrived with two other girls, and they also were hot looking. Let me find out for you if she’s still single.”

John grinned and placed his hand on Lou’s shoulder, “I really appreciate you looking after my interests.”

“Sure, I hope I’ll have more information for you when you return from work.”

John looked at him and smiled in disbelief. “I don’t know how you manage to get all this information and I really don’t care, as long as you do it legally,” said John with a grin.

“But of course,” Lou responded with a touch of irony.

“Have a great day Lou, catch you later,” said John and headed out.

“You to John, see ya.”

John walked onto the street, it was still very early in the morning and the air was cool and refreshing. There were no people on the street apart from a man walking his dog. May was actually the best month of the year to be in New York. It was not unbearably hot like in the summer months, where you had to rush from one air-conditioned place to the next just to keep yourself cool. If you were unlucky to catch a cab with a defect air conditioner, you were captured in a sauna for the length of your ride, perspiring from all pores just to arrive at your destination fully soaked and with your wet behind stuck to the back seat. John looked up to the sky, and although it was still too early to predict the weather for today, he was confident based on the clear skies that it would be another beautiful and sunny day. He turned left after exiting the building on 82nd and walked to the next corner of Amsterdam Avenue. The sudden rush of fresh air awakened his appetite and he picked up his stride to shorten the walking distance to his favorite bagel place. He took a right on Amsterdam and walked for three blocks arriving at Bagel & Co. He became a regular customer the day he moved to the neighborhood.

“Good morning Trish,” he said to the elderly lady at the cash register.

“Good morning John,” she replied with a smile, “you are early today.”

“Yes, I thought I would like to taste a fresh bagel for a change,” he said jokingly.

Trish responded with a piercing look, “Fresh? You must be in the wrong place. We only serve leftovers from the day before.”

John laughed and went to the counter to place his order. He settled for a whole-wheat bagel with low-fat cream cheese and salmon, a large cup of coffee to go and a freshly squeezed cup of orange juice. He paid at the register, withstanding another ironic remark by Trish and seated himself at one of the tables. He unfolded the *Financial Times* he had brought with him and read with interest through the various columns. He was particularly interested in news relating to biotechnology and nanotechnology companies.

He had invested larger sums buying into these markets and was already up by over 30% on his stock portfolio. When he first started out at the FBI, his colleagues wondered how he could afford his luxurious lifestyle and were ironically considering the option that he was actually a mole working for a crime syndicate and passing on valuable inside information in return for tons of cash. The truth was that he successfully played the stock market since his early college days and later on managed to ride the hi-tech bonanza, cashing out just before the internet bubble burst.

After that, John lay low for close to three years and attained his Bachelor's degree in business and a Masters degree in law and economics from New York University. He graduated 3rd in his class and landed a job at Berg, Delaney & Schulz, one of New York's top law firms specializing in corporate law. He successfully worked on several high profile cases and was on the verge of making it to junior partner. Yes, he was financially independent and could actually live a very comfortable life without a single day of work for the rest of his life, but he believed he had a greater purpose in life and it didn't include him lying on a beach sipping at Pina Coladas and catching a tan. Each time he passed by Ground Zero, the spot where New York's tallest towers had once stretched into the sky, he was painfully reminded why he had joined the Bureau. The feeling was so entrenched in his soul that it occasionally overwhelmed him, requiring all his strength to regain his composure.

He remembered that day as if it was yesterday. It was September 11th 2001; he had left his apartment very early this morning to be on time for an important presentation. The client meeting was scheduled for 09:00 that morning and John was in the board room going over the value proposition together with his senior partners. He remembered slipping out of bed that morning trying his best not to wake up Jennifer, but she briefly awoke and gave him a little smile. Her eyes were still closed. "Where are you going?" she mumbled within her sleep.

"Sorry I woke you my darling, I have to be at work very early," he remembered telling her before he leaned over to her side to gently kiss her. Then he whispered into her ear, "I'll see you tonight after work and we'll go out for dinner."

"Ok sweetie, call me," she mumbled, turned over and went back to sleep. How could he have known that this was the last time he would see her lovely face and listen to her gentle voice? He had met Jennifer Krause at a friend's party, and that very evening he knew he was falling for this girl. He was convinced he had found his soul mate and after a year of fulfilling happiness, he proposed to her. He'd never forget the joy on her face and the sparkle in her eyes when she said "Yes," which was followed by a night of passionate love further reinforcing his love for her.

The secretary rushed into the board room and cried out, “There has been some sort of disaster at the World Trade Center.”

John’s stomach instantly turned, he stood up and asked the secretary, “World Trade Center?”

“Yes, CNN is reporting live on that,” she confirmed. John hastily left the board room. He rushed into his office, turned on the TV and changed the channel to CNN. The news anchor reported live on the World Trade Center incident and a live feed showed thick clouds of black smoke rising from one of the towers.

“Oh my God,” he shouted out and dialed Jennifer’s number. The line was busy; he pushed the redial button, but again only the busy tone. His heart started racing when he realized he couldn’t get through to her. His eyes wandered to the TV screen looking at the live broadcast feed from the World Trade Center. At 8:46 a.m., American Airlines Flight number 11 crashed into the northern facade of the North Tower, also known as Tower 1. The aircraft impacted between the 93rd and 99th floors with approximately 10,000 gallons of flammable jet fuel. Jennifer worked as a financial analyst at Clark Jones, a well-respected investment bank with offices at the World Trade Center. John’s thoughts were fuzzy and he had trouble thinking clearly - in which tower did she work? He wasn’t sure anymore and got stirred up that his mind failed to recall in which tower she worked. He was getting nauseous from worry and returned to watching the news. Maybe he could get more information as to which floors were hit. Suddenly another plane appeared on the screen. He was confused. “Is this a replay?” he shouted out loud. He quickly realized it couldn’t be, as the tower was already on fire. He watched in disbelief as the jet liner crashed into the second tower, bursting into a large explosion and causing several floors to instantly disintegrate.

“Holy Shit!” he cried, he could hear his colleagues’ shouts from adjacent offices and the hallway; apparently the entire firm was watching the news. At 9:03, United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the southern facade of Tower 2 of the World Trade Center, known as the South Tower. The plane impacted between floors 77 and 85, killing around 600 people on impact. His head started to ache and he started breathing heavily. Dizziness started to overcome him. He knew at this moment that Jennifer might be dead. Maybe she miraculously was late this morning or didn’t go to work at all. She seemed more tired than usual this morning. Peter Griffin, a senior partner, rushed into John’s office, “Did you get hold of Jennifer?” he asked anxiously, but John didn’t respond.

“John, what’s with Jennifer?” he asked again. John had just pulled out Jennifer’s business card and was looking at it – he couldn’t take his eyes off it. It read Jennifer Krause, Senior Financial Analyst, Clark Jones Investments, World Trade Center, North Tower (WTC 1) 96th floor.

It was a symbolic funeral with an empty casket, as there was no corpse that could be laid to rest. John had found a little consolation in the fact that Jennifer must have died instantly. A large crowd attended the ceremony despite the heavy rain. Even people that weren't that close to John or Jennifer's had shown up to show their respect. It was as if they were all bonded through this tragedy. John was barely listening to the priest's prayers, to him the entire situation seemed incomprehensible and it was like he was captured in a scene from a nightmare from which there was no escape. As the rain washed away his tears, he looked into the sky for answers and he decided in that brief moment of clarity to dedicate his life to fighting terrorism and to protecting his country. He would be restless, relentless and tenacious in his pursuit to hunt down perpetrators that had sworn their life to terrorism.

"God is my witness," he mumbled in silence as the grave was being filled, "I'll catch the bastard that killed you."

Holding on to this thought, John folded the newspaper, took a last sip of his coffee and stood up to leave the Bagel shop. As he passed by the cashier, he smiled at Trish. "Have a great day and make sure the bagels stay fresh," he said on his way out.

"Why should I? I'll see you tomorrow no matter what," she said with a big grin on her face.

Traffic had picked up and the city was awakening to yet another busy and hectic day. John was good at catching cabs, he had a strong whistle and cab drivers weren't able to ignore this talent. It was as if they were conditioned to hear this particular sound and act instinctively. He got into the cab and gave the driver the address "26 Federal Plaza."

3

COMING TO AMERICA

It was hotter than usual for this time of the year and Mustafa Ben-Said tried to stay in the shade of the buildings as he was walking down one of Riyadh's main roads.

'It must be around 115°F,' he thought. Sweat was running down his face and it was making his clothes stick to his body. He grew up in a hot climate, but even for someone accustomed to hot weather it was at the edge of being unbearable. Locals called it a *Hamzin*, a heat wave, which was accompanied by hot dry desert air making every person wish it would pass quickly. Adding to this heat was the smog of exhaust and noise generated by the many cars crowding the streets. It was early afternoon with the sun at its highest point and shade was scarce. Most of the residents refrained from walking the streets and preferred to stay in their air-conditioned homes and offices.

Riyadh was so much different from his hometown; it was very modern and it required getting used to. He grew up in Amman, the capital of Jordan, which was a poor country compared to Saudi Arabia. It lacked the oil fields to transform it into a wealthy nation and much of its economy was reliant on its relations with neighboring countries. Much of the economic strain resulted in the year-long conflict with its close neighbor Israel. After turning eighteen, Mustafa faced the hard fact that his chances for a secure and good paying job to support his family were slim and he decided to leave Jordan and move to Saudi Arabia, where they were hiring foreign workers to sustain their growing oil industry. He was fortunate to have a cousin living in Riyadh who could vouch for him, enabling him to get a residence and work permit and he landed his first job working at an oil drilling station.

Many foreigners lived in Riyadh working for international corporations or were doing business with Saudi companies and most of them were stationed in Riyadh. The city had developed into a dynamic metropolis over the years. The first major thrust came when the Saudis discovered one of the largest oil reserves in the world, which led to an oil boom in the 1950s. With its black gold, the Saudis had transformed Riyadh into an architectural playground attracting the best designers, architects and developers that money could buy.

Mustafa decided to walk, despite the hot weather. It was far easier to detect a tail on foot. The humidity also played in his favor, keeping pedestrians indoors, which made the task of spotting a tail even simpler. He turned right into a narrow side street, which he followed until the second corner, at which he turned left into another smaller street. He kept looking back to assure he wasn't being followed. Satisfied, he followed the road until

he reached a small coffeeshouse. It was one of the traditional local coffeeshouses and the smell of freshly brewed coffee transcended onto the street. He headed to the table located in the farthest corner and looked around to make sure there was no one he knew. He sat down at the table facing the entrance. The coffeeshouse was air conditioned and he started to cool down from the long walk in the sun. The waiter came over and he ordered *Gahwa*, the traditional Arabic coffee, served with Cardamom and a touch of Saffron. A few minutes later, the waiter returned with a silver coffee pot and poured the lovely smelling drink into a small porcelain cup he was carrying on a silver tray. Mustafa took the filled cup eager to taste the drink. "Shukran," he said politely, thanking the waiter for the prompt service. The coffee was strong and aromatic, just the way he liked it.

Suleiman called him this morning and instructed him to meet him at this place at 1:30 p.m. Suleiman had introduced himself at one of the weekly religious gatherings that took place at his congregation. It was a gathering of men of all ages which took place at the mosque after the evening prayers. Suleiman knew most of the members of the congregation and he was always surrounded by a crowd of people who seemed to enjoy listening to what he had to say. He had a tall and slender posture, a slim face with strong features and he wore a cleanly trimmed beard. His gentle eyes exuded wisdom, as if they were capable of looking into a man's soul. When he spoke, it was with a calm but firm voice and always with a touch of eloquence. Mustafa was right away drawn to Suleiman and when this popular brother of faith approached him, he was more than delighted to make his acquaintance.

During these weekly gatherings, the teachings of the Koran were elaborated in more detail and interpretations of paragraphs in the Koran were heatedly discussed. It was where scholars of Islam met with commoners to exchange ideas and beliefs and convince each other that their suggested path was the right choice to becoming a righteous and religious follower. Among the many attendants of these gatherings were also members of Islamic extremist groups using the disguise of religious activity to approach brothers they believed were susceptible to other forms of teachings. Like a hunter circling his prey, these recruiters would engage the more innocent and weaker brothers in faith and use manipulative tactics and psychology to introduce them to a more radical and contradictory interpretation of Islamic faith and then convince them to become part of a greater cause to protect their faith from the unbelievers in this world. These gatherings were the perfect venue to recruit new members for their organization and brainwash them over the coming months to accept and commit to any mission placed upon them. Suleiman was one of the more experienced hunters, always stalking for prey and using his gift to single out the insecure and easy to influence individuals and lure them into his cleverly prepared trap.

Islam and religious beliefs were used as the underlying and binding components to assure that whatever recruits were asked to do, it was sanctioned by their faith. Misled by their new leaders, they completely submitted themselves to the greater cause and became programmable drones ready to self-destruct if they were ordered to. Mustafa had become one of these programmable drones, unaware of the fact that he was a puppet on strings, skillfully handled by his puppet master Suleiman. He truly believed in the greater cause - the use of *Jihad*, the holy war, to defend Islam against Zionism, Christianity and the secular West, and he was ready to play his part in defending his belief, even if it meant sacrificing his life.

Suleiman entered the coffeehouse and looked around the place to find Mustafa. He found him sitting at a secluded table in the back corner of the room, which was perfectly suited for their meeting. As their eyes met he smiled and walked over. Mustafa stood up to greet him. "My brother, I am happy to see you," he said and they embraced.

"The pleasure is all mine, thanks for meeting me on such short notice," replied Suleiman and they both took a seat.

"How is the Gahwa? It is said to be one of the best you can get in this city," asked Suleiman.

"Oh, it is really good. I haven't tasted such flavor in quite a time, not since my grandmother used to grind beans to brew her own special blend, may she rest in peace," replied Mustafa with a wide hand gesture. Suleiman signaled the waiter to come over.

"Please bring us two more cups of your finest blend, and a plate of your best dates," he instructed and the waiter acknowledged with a cordial bow and left with the order. Suleiman leaned over to be closer to Mustafa so he could speak in a softer tone.

"My brother, the time has come for you to take on responsibility and reaffirm your faith," he said. Mustafa looked up. 'Finally,' he thought; these were the words he had been longing to hear for many months. A rush of excitement emerged and he moved closer before speaking.

"You know I'm ready and that I have been waiting for the chance to prove to you that I'm fully committed to our cause," he said excitedly. Suleiman nodded.

"I never doubted your dedication and loyalty to our brotherhood, but finally the moment has arrived to turn your belief into action and I must be certain that you will take every necessary step to successfully carry out your mission," he said.

"I can assure you I will," ensured Mustafa, with conviction in his voice.

"Good," replied Suleiman, content at Mustafa's attitude. The waiter arrived with another round of coffee and a plate of dates, which he placed on the table. They both waited for the waiter to leave and Suleiman took a date and asked, "Have you been practicing your English?"

“Yes, every day, several hours, for more than five months. I have also been practicing in groups including many hours of real-life simulations to cope with any possible situation. My teachers are very happy with my progress and my speaking level, although I am still working to improve my reading and writing skills,” replied Mustafa.

Suleiman was pleased to hear that. “This is very good news, I am happy to learn that you are taking your studies seriously,” he said, “to speak and understand the language of our enemies is one of the most important skills you need to master.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an envelope, which he laid on the table. Mustafa glanced at the envelope and waited for Suleiman to explain. Suleiman made sure no one was listening to their conversation. He lowered his voice even further to make sure only Mustafa would be able to hear his words.

“This package contains a new passport and a detailed background on your new identity. You must memorize every detail of your new life as if you had lived every moment of it. This will be your cover to apply for a US visa. You’ll have to pass an interview at the US embassy in order to receive your visa,” he paused, “I cannot stress how important it is that you pass this interview,” he insisted.

Mustafa tried his best to conceal his excitement. ‘America,’ he thought, ‘what was the mission they had in mind for him?’ He knew it was much too early for him to ask for additional information. It became clear to him over the past months that he only needed to know enough to get him to the next point. This way, if he was compromised or caught, he couldn’t reveal anything. Not even under torture. It was a clever and simple way of assuring that no vital information would leak and fall into enemy hands.

“I will pass the interview and I will get my visa,” said Mustafa with an assured tone and Suleiman believed his words.

“You have ten days to familiarize yourself with your new identity. Then you will fill out your visa application form and go to the US embassy to process the application. You will contact me again only after you receive your visa, is that clear?” he gave Mustafa a piercing look to emphasize his words.

“I understand,” replied Mustafa and Suleiman relaxed a bit.

“My brother I have to go now. I have faith in you and your abilities. May Allah be with you,” he said, and left money on the table to cover the tab. Mustafa got up from his chair, “May Allah be with all of us,” he said to Suleiman. They embraced and Suleiman left the coffeehouse without looking back. Mustafa took the envelope and pocketed it. Finally, his hard work and patience had paid off and he was at the beginning of a dangerous but fulfilling mission that would lead him deep into enemy territory. He waited for a few more minutes before exiting the coffeehouse and then walked in the direction of his home. He tried to imagine what his new identity would be like, but he already decided that he would study hard to become this new person.

UNDER A CZECH SKY

It was a sunny afternoon in Brno; people were crowding the cafés and beer gardens and enjoying that summer was just around the corner. Beautiful girls were showing off their figures in short skirts and minis, attracting the attention of the male population and the many businessmen who were unwinding from a long day at one of the several international tradeshows at the Brno Convention Center. It was the second largest city in the Czech Republic, but most Czechs associated the city only with trade shows. Unlike Prague, which was a magnet for millions of tourists from all over the world, Brno relied on its more than 40 annual conventions to contribute to this region's economy. Dr. Pavel Novak was sitting at a café in the center of town, nervously sipping at his coffee. He left work early to meet Slavo to discuss several issues of their arrangement.

Pavel was in his late forties, tall and slender built, with strong facial features and the first signs of baldness. He was the Director of product management and innovation at Explosan, a company specializing in the production of propellants and explosives for commercial and military applications. Most notably, it was the company behind the creation of Semtex, the infamous plastic explosive used by terrorists to bring down Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 258 passengers. It only took twelve ounces of the substance, molded inside a Toshiba cassette recorder, to blast the plane out of the sky.

As a result, exports for Semtex fell after the name became closely associated with terrorist attacks and as of 2001, approximately only 10 tons of Semtex were produced annually, almost all for domestic use. Export of Semtex was progressively tightened, and since 2002, all of Explosan's sales were controlled by a government ministry. Also in response to international pressure, *ethylene glycol dinitrate* was added to Semtex as a detection taggant to produce a distinctive vapor signature that aided in detection.

Pavel started working at Explosan nearly 20 years ago as a technical assistant on one of the Semtex production lines. He knew this substance in and out and had witnessed all the bad press and regulatory changes that had put a strain on his company, but Explosan had managed to overcome this crisis by concentrating on expanding its product offering. Today, they provided a wide range of explosives that were widely used in commercial applications. Pavel had two more years left until his pension and he was looking forward to spending them with his wife peacefully and without wasting any thoughts on destructive materials. He dreamed of settling down

with his wife in the vicinity of Mikulov, a major center of winemaking set below the picturesque Pálava hills. They would own a vineyard, grow their own grape vines and become respected winemakers. Two more years he thought would secure his pension, enough to live comfortably, but his special arrangement with Slavo would secure the necessary money to purchase one of the best parcels of land and realize his dream of winemaking.

“How are you doing Pavel?” Pavel was ripped out of his thoughts and looked up. Salvo seated himself at the table. “Seems you were daydreaming, I hope I didn’t startle you,” he said. He was in his mid-forties with dark hair and exceptionally well dressed.

“No, not at all, I was working a bit and going through several scenarios,” replied Pavel to defend his absentmindedness. Slavo’s full name was Slavomir Dvorsky, but everyone referred to him as Slavo.

“We have a big problem,” said Pavel. “In two days our production site is going to be inspected. Government inspectors are going to comb through every inch of our compound to verify that everything is in line with the inflicted production guidelines. This means they will also inspect each of our storage facilities to make sure each gram of explosive is accounted for.”

Slavo was untouched by this announcement. “I see, so we have to move things up a notch. Are you close to reaching the required amount?”

Pavel nodded. “Yes, I am sure we can reach the targeted delivery goal within tonight’s production cycle.”

“Very well, this means that we’ll have enough time to remove the entire residue and all traces of this product before the inspectors arrive,” said Slavo, “tomorrow night we will move the product and your job will be done. You have done well and we decided to increase your compensation,” he said with a thin smile.

“Well thanks, but I can’t relax until the product is moved to another location. What’s your plan? I need to know you can handle this on such short notice. I am really nervous they will find out,” said Pavel tensely. If the inspectors had reason to believe Explosan was producing explosive composites above their granted quota, they could shut down the entire factory.

Slavo responded calmly, “No need for you to worry, everything is under control. We have prepared for this type of situation months in advance. Our people are in place and ready to go. So if you keep calm and hold up to your end of the bargain, everything will be over in two days.”

“Of course I’ll hold up to my end, I just want this to be over already.”

“I understand your concerns and you will be rewarded generously for your work. Let me contact our people and instruct them on the new pick up date. I will call you once everything is in place to coordinate the final schedule,” said Slavo.

Pavel was still a little nervous, but he knew these people would do anything to collect their product undetected and this calmed him down a bit. “Ok, call me tonight with the details,” he said and got up from the table. He looked around and then left the café.

Slavo took out his cell phone and made a call, “We’re on...the product has to be moved tomorrow night. Make sure your people are ready and call me back to confirm everything is in place and good to go.” Then he finished his coffee and left.

It was around six in the evening when Pavel arrived at the main entrance of Explosan’s factory complex. It was situated on the outskirts of Brno and was a highly secured facility, which was natural for a company dealing with sensitive materials and which manufactured a wide range of explosives. Two closed-circuit cameras were pointed at coinciding angles at the heavy steel gate and covered the entire entrance area. Another camera was located in the intercom panel for identification purposes. Pavel drove his car into the driveway leading to the entrance and stopped at the intercom panel. He pressed the button and the light on the intercom panel came on, accompanied by a voice emitting from the speaker. “Good evening Mr. Novak, please insert your keycard,” said the security guard on duty. Pavel inserted his 128-bit encrypted keycard and the front gate opened. He passed the entrance and drove into the sluice, waiting for the gate to close behind him. After the gate closed, he inserted his keycard into a second panel to open the second gate leading to the factory grounds. Explosan’s factory complex consisted of several buildings arranged in four blocks. The first block closest to the entrance housed the corporate offices. It consisted of four eight story buildings arranged in a square. They were all connected by sky bridges on the fourth floor. It was a modern steel and glass complex that won the prize for best architectural design in the year of its completion. A fountain designed by one of the Czech Republic’s promising artists was located in the center of this complex, surrounded by areas of trimly cut lawn and nicely arranged trees that provided shade on sunny days. Several sculptures were spread around the lawn and numerous white benches lined the walkways, inviting employees to take a break from their daily work routine. Adjacent to the building was a large parking lot reserved for employees, which was empty apart from a few cars, as most of the workforce had already left. The second and third blocks contained the manufacturing facilities and consisted each of two very large, rectangular shaped buildings, approximately four stories high, with flat rooftops and large window panels at the upper floor levels that stretched across the entire wall structure. The buildings reminded the observer of white painted boxes and looked rather like modern art galleries than factory buildings. Each building had large sliding steel doors on each of their outer facing walls and ramps leading up to a second level with separate entrances. White chimneys rose into the sky from two of the buildings. The final block

contained the storage facilities, which were made up of three larger buildings that were also painted in white, but which were windowless. Each building had a loading dock covering the entire length of the building and a series of sliding steel doors. At the top of each building, large numbers from one through three were painted in black paint to identify each of the storage facilities. Thirty or more forklifts were parked in neat order next to the building of storage facility 1 and yellow, blue and red barrels were piled in a three level high block formation next to the right side wall of storage facility 3. Four large trucks were parked side by side and stood at the ramp of storage facility 2. The entire factory ground was kept in impeccably clean condition, which exuded a level of sterility one wouldn't expect from a manufacturing complex and which was comparable to an Orwellian movie scene.

Pavel parked his BMW 3 Series in the separate parking lot close to the entrance, which was reserved for senior management and guests. He would get himself a 7 Series once this was over, a black one, fully loaded and with aluminum rims. He would be able to easily afford it and maybe he would take his wife on a trip to the Seychelles. They had always talked about it; that if they one day had the money, they would love to go and now this dream was close to becoming reality. Pavel walked up to the entrance of the main office wing and entered the lobby. It was a spacious and tastefully decorated, with two separate sitting areas with comfortable looking black leather couches arranged around a large glass-top lounge table. The lighting was dimmed to a minimum to conserve energy, which kept large sections of the lobby area scarcely lit. Only the reception desk area was brightly lit. Several oversized and modern oil paintings were decorating the walls and an assortment of exotic plants, arranged in groups, complemented the overall design of the lobby. The two guards on the night shift were sitting behind the reception desk and were engaged in a lively conversation.

“Good evening,” said Pavel interrupting their chat.

“Good evening Mr. Novak, are you pulling another all-nighter?” asked one of the guards.

“Unfortunately, yes,” replied Pavel. “By the way, I am expecting a visitor later this evening. I'll ring you a few minutes before he arrives so you can prepare his visitor's badge.”

“No problem Mr. Novak,” assured the guard. Pavel smiled back at him and passed the security gate waving his keycard at the ID panel, which released the lock mechanism indicated by the approving short sound and green lit panel. Walking over to the elevators, Pavel looked back at the guards, who had resumed their conversation.

“Let's hope they don't run out of topics to talk about,” he thought. It would definitely help tonight to have guards on duty that were distracted from work. The elevator stopped at the top floor and Pavel made his way to his office. It was a corner office overlooking on one side the green oasis with

its arrangement of sculptures and white benches and the manufacturing facilities on the other. He had earned this office with many years of dedicated hard work and was the only senior manager with a degree in chemistry and industrial engineering. Today he was a member of the company's executive team responsible for overseeing product management and manufacturing process engineering, and people respected him for his in-depth knowledge in the field of applicative explosives.

His office was not too spacious, but large enough to provide a seating area with two contemporary leather sofas, a leather chair and sofa table which he liked to use for most of his meetings. Pictures of his wife and kids were arranged on the shelves on one of the file cabinets and two framed art prints decorated the walls of his office, which was all he did to personalize his work space. He opened the third drawer of the file cabinet and pulled out a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label, grabbed a glass and poured himself a drink. He went over to his desk and sat down in his comfortable chair, leaned back and rested his feet on his desk. Tonight he was going to complete the project, which had started several months ago and by tomorrow he would be a rich man. He was nervous and the booze helped him to relax. As he closed his eyes, his thoughts wandered back to the day when Slavo had first contacted him.

It happened at the annual EFEE World Conference on Explosives and Blasting held last September in Vienna. A businessman approached him after he gave his presentation on how to maximize the explosive impact for mining applications. Pavel was a member of the European Federation of Explosives Engineers and a frequently invited expert speaker at many conferences and industry events. He also published numerous technical papers on high explosives and demolition research, which were greatly valued in the industry circle. Slavo had introduced himself as a representative of Minex Ltd., a global mining company, which was looking for new and innovative blasting techniques to improve efficiencies and production yield for their various mining operations. Industry contacts had all pointed to Pavel as an expert in this field and Slavo had been looking forward to meeting him in person. Slavo was a very likeable person who had a good understanding of the mining business and he knew how to compliment Pavel on his insights and expertise on suggested improvements for various explosive mining applications. Slavo had made it clear that his company was interested in hiring his services as an expert consultant and he suggested they meet for dinner to discuss the options and possibly to finalize a deal. Pavel arrived at an exclusive French restaurant in Vienna's city center and Slavo immediately ordered a very expensive bottle of Bordeaux wine which really got Pavel's attention.

"This is a 1961 Pomerol La Fleur Petrus," said Pavel raising his eyebrow, "It is an excellent choice but very pricey, are you sure you want to spend 3,000 Euros on a bottle of wine?"

“My dear Pavel, we only hire the best people in the business and we know how to show our appreciation. Consider this a warm up to what may be coming your way if we decide to work together,” replied Slavo with a smile on his face.

Pavel raised his glass in appreciation; as a wine connoisseur he was impressed and was eagerly awaiting to taste this exquisite wine, but he was also questioning the true motive behind this meeting. No one he knew in this business would go to that level of expenses to impress a person just to accept a business offer.

“So...what is Minex up to these days? And why do you require my advice in blasting rocks?...It appears that with the proper amount and right type of explosive, everything is possible and by your wine selection it is obvious that your company has the money to hire the best explosives experts and materials to achieve their goals?” observed Pavel.

Slavo was ready for these types of questions. “Truly spoken,” he paused. “We specialize today in the extraction of minerals such as Gold, Silver, Copper, and Diamonds and are hired by mining companies around the globe to use specially applied explosives and mining techniques to excavate the product, while preserving as much of the landscape as possible.” He kept his eyes on Pavel, “As you are surely aware, environmentalists are making it more difficult today for mining companies to extract their products and local laws have been put in place to conserve natural environments, further adding complexity to the mining business.”

Pavel nodded; he was aware of the problems caused by explosive excavation methods and that they had ruined many of the once beautiful landscapes, transforming them into irreparable wasteland. Governments were trying to balance the need for monetary income through mining operations with the need to conserve and protect their natural resources and wildlife. Projects were underway in many countries to convert large pieces of land into national reserves, prohibiting mining operations on these marked parcels of land. Mining companies were now forced to find softer excavation methods to convince local governmental representatives that they could still extract deep buried riches without irreversibly harming the environment.

Slavo continued, “We believe that by hiring the right experts to develop new explosive applications that are softer on the environment, we can convince local authorities to grant our customers additional mining rights for untapped geographical regions...which of course will have to work with us in return to extract the product. It’s a win-win situation with a lot of money at stake on both ends.”

“I understand, and you’re hoping that I am the person to help you deliver these new methods,” said Pavel and took another sip of the superb wine.

“Yes, we have asked around and you’re one of the most named experts in this field.” Slavo tried to say it as nonchalantly as possible.

“I am truly flattered...I really am. So how do you propose we set the framework for our cooperation? I am sure you have already lined out a proposal and would like to share it with me,” said Pavel, throwing an anticipating look at Slavo.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” said Slavo as he leaned over the table, “we are ready to offer you a consulting fee of 50,000 Euros per month for a period of a year.”

Pavel’s eyes widened; he had to contemplate if he had heard correctly, “Did you just say 50,000 Euros per month for one year?”

“Yes, you heard right. We are ready to offer you this fee as we have several promising opportunities lined up and we need your expertise to suggest adequate solutions that present a fresh approach to our mining problem.” He paused before continuing, “However...”

‘Here it comes,’ Pavel thought; it was simply too good to be true. Consulting fees of this magnitude were very rare in his line of business.

“You have to make your decision by tomorrow morning as we are under considerable time pressure to present our customers with an expert panel that will be able to provide them with a solution to their excavation dilemma,” insisted Slavo.

Pavel had a questioning expression on his face, “I just want to make sure I understand your proposal correctly. You are willing to offer me a consulting fee of 600 thousand over the course of a year and my job will be to come up with a solution scope to provide soft explosive applications to ensure a more environmental mining operation...and all I need to do is provide you with my decision by tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” said Slavo dryly.

Pavel leaned back “Well, there is only one problem. As you know I am an employee of Explosan and as tempting as the job is you’re offering, it also presents a conflict of interest and would violate the non-compete agreement I have signed with my employer. The ramifications for breaking this agreement are far reaching.”

“I understand your concerns and I have taken this into consideration before making the decision to approach you. In addition to acquiring your expertise, we will also need to purchase the necessary explosives to execute the newly developed mining techniques you develop. Explosan would benefit from delivering these explosives to us, which would give you the necessary cover to be in close touch with us and explain your frequent visits to our customer sites. It would also provide you with a lucrative sales opportunity that you managed to bring to the table, giving you additional credit with your top brass.” Slavo poured himself another glass and placed the empty bottle on the table.

Pavel rubbed his chin, thinking about the proposal. It actually could work and the upside for him was tremendous. “Slavo, it looks like you have

just won yourself an expert consultant,” he said with smile on his face and extended his hand to shake on the deal. Slavo grinned and they shook hands. “Now let’s order dinner, I am famished. We’ll close the contract details tomorrow morning. How about I order another bottle?”

“I’m all for it,” said Pavel.

* * *

The following morning, Slavo arrived at his hotel with the drafted contract. They agreed on the terms and Pavel signed the contract on the spot, becoming unofficially a Minex consultant in the field of explosive mining applications. The following months were intensive and Explosan’s board was very happy with the millions they were pulling in from their new customer Minex. Pavel traveled frequently to visit several Minex customers and he and Slavo met on regular basis to explore further business opportunities. Slavo had opened a numbered bank account for Pavel and each month he transferred the consulting fee of 50,000 Euros into that account. Pavel couldn’t be happier, so he thought. Two months before the consulting agreement ended, Pavel received a call from Slavo, who wanted to meet him urgently. He had arrived in Prague yesterday and was on his way to Brno to meet him at his office. It was Slavo’s first official visit to Explosan and he wanted to take the opportunity to get a tour of the entire factory site. Pavel was a little worried at first, but shook off the anxiety as everything had been going very well over the past months and he didn’t see any reason for Slavo to jeopardize their arrangement.

SEMTEX-O

Slavo passed through the security gates to Explosan's headquarters. He was directed to the visitor's parking lot and when he entered the lobby, Pavel was already waiting for him.

"Good to see you again," said Slavo.

"Yes indeed, it has been several weeks since we last saw each other," replied Pavel.

"How are you?"

"Well, not too bad. Life is good and there are several thousand reasons it's going to be better as you know. But I was a bit surprised that you wanted to come and see me at work. As you can tell it's a slightly awkward situation," reminded Pavel.

They had agreed not to meet at Explosan and to maintain a very low profile. All communications would be done over the phone or via email to ensure Pavel's integrity. Pavel wondered what was so important that it had brought Slavo to break their gentlemen's agreement. He waived Slavo over to the reception desk, where his visitor's badge was waiting for him. The receptionist, a cute looking girl in her mid-twenties, asked Slavo for a picture ID before handing him the badge. As they walked through the security gate to the elevators, Slavo picked up the conversation where they had left it.

"There's nothing suspicious in coming to see you at work. It's a customer's prerogative to come and inspect the manufacturing facilities where the order is completed. Minex is today one of your larger accounts I presume," he said and waited for Pavel's reaction.

"I guess you're right. So what's so important you wanted to see me today?"

"Let's discuss it in your office, it's a sensitive subject and I don't want anyone listening in on us by mistake." Pavel looked concerned, but waited with his questions until they reached his office. He pointed Slavo to the sofa.

"Please have a seat. Can I offer you something to drink?" asked Pavel.

"Sure, an espresso would be fine." Pavel dialed the extension of his personal assistant and ordered two espressos and a bottle of mineral water. He joined Slavo and seated himself on the opposite side facing the door. Slavo looked around the office and saw the pictures of Pavel's family. "Nice family. How old are your kids?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, these are pictures when they were much younger. My oldest son is now 28 and beginning his career as an architect. He is getting married next summer and my daughter is 25 and is about to complete her Masters degree

in biochemistry. They both live now in Prague and we barely get to see them. What about you? You have kids?”

“Yes three, a girl and two boys. They live with their mother. Unfortunately our marriage didn’t last and we got divorced two years ago. I try to see them as often as I can, but work is very demanding and I have a very busy travel schedule as you know.” Slavo always had the perfect answers at hand to keep up his charade. He knew what to tell his partners and victims to keep them comfortable and to make them believe he was a man they could trust.

Pavel nodded. “Yeah I know. Still you should find the time to be with your kids. They grow up so fast and suddenly, then they don’t need you to be around anymore.” Before Slavo could respond, they heard a knock on the door and Pavel’s personal assistant entered the room with a tray. She placed it on the couch table and said to Pavel, “Mr. Novak, if this is all I am calling it a day.”

“That’s fine Martina. I’ll see you tomorrow, have a nice evening.”

“Thanks you too,” and with that she left the room and closed the door behind her. They both drank their espressos and Pavel poured them two glasses of water.

“Pavel, our agreement is going well isn’t it? I believe in two months your consulting agreement will come to an end. I think the time has come to explore other opportunities,” said Slavo.

“I have to agree that I am excellently compensated and it will last as long as no one finds out that I am doing business on the side,” said Pavel wearily.

“Rest assured my friend, I have no intention of ratting you out, besides we are greatly benefiting from your expertise and wouldn’t want to lose you,” assured Slavo. He waited for a second before going on, “We have been approached by one of our customers with a special order. There is a lot of money at stake here, but it falls into a grey area and possibly oversteps the laws in your country,” he warned.

“How much money are we talking about?” asked Pavel.

Slavo smiled inwardly. He had experienced this many times before. Once he got people hooked onto money, it was easy to manipulate them into breaking the law or giving up their ethic restraints, just as long as the price for doing so was high enough. “I cannot disclose the deal size, but your take would be two million dollars,” he said.

Pavel nearly choked drinking his water. “Wow, that’s a lot of money,” he said trying to conceal his excitement at a chance to earn that much money. “What’s the catch? What would I have to do to get that amount of cash?”

“As I said, it’s on the verge of being illegal and requires a slightly different service from you,” said Slavo. He took a sip from his water. “We need you to provide us with an altered version of your Semtex-H product.”

Pavel looked puzzled, “Altered? What do you mean? And what’s the purpose of this request?”

“Unfortunately I cannot disclose who our customer is nor can I tell you what the real purpose is for this order. Actually we ourselves do not know the actual purpose and frankly we don’t care. It’s a huge contract and they are willing to pay premium price and in cash,” replied Slavo. He had to lure Pavel into the trap.

Pavel couldn’t keep his focus. Suddenly he had this huge figure on his mind. Two million, this was a real fortune and it could pay for a lot of his dreams. “Tell me more about the requirements for this order. I need first to know what I am getting into before I can commit to anything.”

Slavo smiled, ‘Got you my friend,’ he thought. “Of course I understand. Here’s the deal. We need twenty tons of Semtex-H to be altered to the following specs. All chemical taggants that aid in the detection of explosives have to be removed. No coloring, which means you’ll have to omit the reddish-orange dye and last, we need you to increase the blast power and radius of the current Semtex-H version.”

Pavel was silent. He was trying to understand the implications of these specifications. These were very unorthodox requirements and they broke at least 10 local and international laws he could think of. He was sure there were more, but any one of these violations was enough to send him to jail if he got caught. “This customer of yours, in which line of business is he?” he asked.

“As I told you before I cannot reveal too many specifics, but they are in the mining business.”

Pavel couldn’t help but laugh. “So why would they need an undetectable and unrecognizable version of our product? As you know we are obliged by law to mark our Semtex products with volatile chemicals to ensure easy detection by customs and border authorities. Any violation of these requirements is punishable by law and would result in a heinous fining of the company and a potential shutdown of all company operations. Furthermore, the people responsible would be indicted for breaking the law and could face a long jail sentence.”

Slavo nodded. “Yes, I am well aware of that. It’s risky, but on the other hand it pays extremely well. The only thing I can tell you is that they have some issues with local authorities to use high explosives at one of their mining sites and are looking for a way to get it into the country unnoticed.”

Pavel wasn’t convinced yet. “It sounds very suspicious. As much as I would like to put my hands on two million bucks, I am just worried that these explosives could be used for terrorist activities.”

Slavo narrowed his eyebrows “Now, now, please don’t jump to the wrong conclusions,” he said raising his voice. “Minex is not in the business of brokering deals for terrorist organizations; we simply help our customers deal with complex mining problems and find solutions to address these problems.

Terrorists can simply buy Semtex by the kilo on the black market. The last time I checked prices range from a thousand to fifteen hundred US and they certainly do not need us or anybody else to help them with that. Your company was a main supplier of Semtex to Gaddafi and was instrumental in delivering over nine hundred tons of this stuff. In addition, if I recall correctly, you managed to deliver another 1,000 tons to other unstable states, such as Syria, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. So please...give me a break. You're not in the position to point any fingers...I guess a leader such as Gaddafi would happily part from several tons of his stash, if it was to teach a mutual enemy a lesson. We on the other hand are just here to do business and yes...it involves using high explosives, but only for commercial applications.”

Slavo had rehearsed his response several times. It was instrumental in convincing Pavel that although he was offering him to participate in a highly illegal project, it wasn't one that involved endangering people.

Pavel was well aware of the fact that Semtex was available on the black market and that it was easily attainable through the right channels. His company had invested considerably in damage control after the Lockerbie disaster. Semtex, however, became a synonym for terrorist bomb attacks and Explosan had made a proactive decision to add detection measures to their best-selling product. It was a clear message aimed at reducing international pressure in the UN to avoid a resolution that would require Explosan to shut down its Semtex production for good. Apart from Semtex, there were other plastic explosives widely in use such as C-4 developed by the Americans or PE4, the British version, and there were many other variants in use in different countries, but somehow Semtex had become the preferred house brand for terrorist as it was more widely distributed, easier to attain and available in undetectable form. Adding to this were several occasions in which former Explosan employees had tried to earn a quick buck by selling off stolen supplies of Semtex to arms dealers.

Actually, Pavel was looking for a reason to believe Slavo's words and it certainly helped that he was being offered a very large sum to comply with the order requirements. His company would sell twenty tons of Semtex-H and book around thirty million Dollars in order value and he would get an additional sales commission of two to three percent, earning him another six to nine hundred thousand. All in all, he would be able to pocket two and a half to three million and this would definitely secure his pension and allow him to realize his dreams.

“Slavo, please don't get me wrong. I am not implying that you or your company is cohering with terrorist organizations that are looking for ways to get their hands on experimental plastic explosives. But you have to admit that these requirements are very doubtful, especially the removing of the chemical taggant, which is violating international conventions and the changing of the dye to disguise its type.” He looked at Slavo, awaiting his response.

“The only plausible reason I can think of is that the mining site is located in a country with strict environmental laws and regulation and that our customer will need to smuggle the explosives into the country. Other than that, I do not care much. This is a legitimate customer that has been doing business with us for many years and who has generated substantial revenues for our company. Believe me, I wouldn’t have approached you if we suspected them to misuse your product to harm people, let alone use them to support terrorist activities.” Slavo gave a convincing performance and Pavel tended to accept his explanations.

“Well, OK then, let’s do it,” he said after further consideration. The temptation of becoming a rich man was too great to let it pass him by. Such an opportunity presented itself only once in a lifetime and Pavel wasn’t going to miss this train. He paused for a second before continuing, “However...the biggest problem will be to produce a substantial amount of Semtex without adding the taggant. At Explosan, every Semtex production cycle is logged and requires a chain of approvals to comply with international regulations. Each Semtex batch that leaves the production facility is tested and checked thoroughly to assure the chemical taggant has been added. I will need to come up with a plausible explanation to alter the current composition. Increasing the blast impact is uncommon and not in line with our generic offering. Omitting the dye color is easily explained, I can always refer to a mechanical error in the line set up and that we couldn’t afford to discard the entire order. It happened before.”

Slavo gave Pavel a smile. “You see; I knew why we are offering you the big bucks. I just want to assure you that there is really no reason to fear that you are doing anything to betray your ethical code. I wouldn’t want you to do anything that you cannot support in good conscience.”

Pavel was still wondering about the color change. Not many people know the difference between Semtex-A and H, but these are two very different plastic explosives with two different compositions and commercial applications. The A version was used for blasting and was designed to be used for destruction of concrete, metal constructions or underwater blasting operations. It was also commonly used in rock blasting, which applied the controlled use of explosives to excavate or remove rock. It was a technique used most often in mining and civil engineering, such as dam construction. Semtex-H was mainly used for shock hardening, which is the process used to strengthen metals and alloys. What makes Semtex-H more powerful is the different composition using two types of high explosives. Both Semtex variants use a mixture of PETN, one of the most powerful high explosives known and RDX, which forms the base for a number of common military explosives. RDX is also used as a major component of many plastic bonded explosives used in nuclear weapons. Semtex A consists of a 94.3% PETN and 5.7% RDX mix, whereas Semtex H mixes 49.8% PETN with 50.2% RDX. A

plasticizer is then added to the mix to desensitize the highly explosive mixture and to give it its malleable characteristics. Both versions require a detonator to ignite the explosion, making Semtex one of the safest plastic explosives in the world. Both versions are recognized by their different color and chemical taggants in accordance with the international convention regulations signed in Montreal in 1991. Semtex A is reddish brown and H is red-orange; therefore removing the colorization would impede the recognition process and the Semtex blocks could easily be mistaken for some sort of sculpting material.

“I certainly hope you are right,” responded Pavel, but he already made up his mind and was ready to accept the offer. He would take advantage of the goose that lay the golden eggs, “there are still some issues we have to confront to make sure this will go as planned. I don’t know how familiar you are with the various explosives detection technologies. Removing the chemical taggant is of course necessary to avoid easy detection, but it won’t be enough. There are enough technologies out there that would still be able to detect a non-tagged Semtex variant.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’s not enough to remove the taggant?” said Slavo, dismayed at the news.

“Exactly...what I am saying is that the plastic explosive variant you are seeking will have to withstand a wider range of detection methods. The taggant is just a signature chemical that facilitates the detection of plastic explosives, but certain detectors will also pick up all the other basic chemicals that are used to create explosives. Can you tell me which detection technologies are in use by the local authorities?” he hoped Slavo could provide him with the necessary information. It certainly would help him to narrow down the specs for the new Semtex variant.

“I’m afraid not...maybe I can get go back to our client and try to get this information. I’d still appreciate if you could bring me up to speed on the technologies in use,” said Slavo. Understanding the challenge was essential to steer the project in the right direction.

“I’ll try to keep it as simple as possible,” said Pavel. “There are mechanical scent detection systems, X-ray and radiation based systems. All of them use different methods to detect and identify the various types of explosives. A few of them work better than others, while some of them are too bulky for field deployment or too slow in generating instant chemical readouts.

“Mechanical scent detection systems, also known as spectrometers, can detect and identify very low concentrations of chemicals. This is what you see at most airports. The way it works is that each chemical is tested in its gas phase, meaning it is analyzed on a molecular level. Molecules come in different weights and sizes, and in order to be identified they first need to be ionized, which is the physical process of converting an atom or molecule into an ion by adding or removing charged particles. Simply said, this is achieved

through an electric charge. Now...by measuring the time it takes for an ion to pass through an electric field, the spectrometer is able to separate ions by shape and charge and identify them very accurately.” Pavel could tell from the concentration on Slavo’s face that he was processing every word. Slavo gave him a small nod to indicate that he had understood everything and Pavel moved on.

“Gas chromatography, another technique, requires molecules to travel through a tube-like device, which is filled with a gas. The gas acts like a filter and each molecule travels through the gas chamber at a different speed. The time it takes for a molecule to pass defines its identity. Luckily, this technology is prone to errors and the chemical analysis takes too long. This is the reason you don’t see them at airports.” Pavel poured himself a cup of water, his mouth was drying out.

“So far I am following you,” affirmed Slavo. Pavel had a good way of explaining complex processes.

“Good...the last of the detector technologies uses the fluorescence of a polymer to detect miniscule traces of nitro-based chemicals. The new generation of these handheld detectors only requires being in the presence of chemical vapors. If the polymer detects a nitro-based molecule, it will quench or turn off its fluorescence, which is an indicator for the presence of an explosive compound. These detectors are very good and we are starting to see them more and more in the field.”

Slavo was listening very carefully. The more he heard, the more concerned he got. How was Pavel going to provide them with an explosive that could avoid detection of these highly sensitive systems? As if Pavel could read his mind, he addressed his thoughts.

“I know what you’re thinking. How is it possible to bypass these detectors...but before I offer the solution, we need to cover the other detection methods,” he said.

“There are more?” said Slavo and shook his head.

“Oh yes, and more are being invented as we speak. Terrorism has created a boom in this field of expertise and many start ups and established companies are competing in this very lucrative market.”

“So what else is out there?” asked Slavo.

“X-ray machines.”

“X-ray...but how can you detect an explosive by looking at an image? Plastic explosives can be molded into any shape and the person or software wouldn’t be able to know what to look for,” argued Slavo.

“That’s true, but every object has a specific density and these specially designed X-ray machines can detect these nuances. These systems contain an explosives library and a color coding schema to create a true or false readout,” explained Pavel.

“I guess you would be able to alter the density of your new Semtex product to throw them off,” concluded Slavo.

“Yes, you’re quite right. I can play with it and create a density pattern that would blend in with other harmless objects,” confirmed Pavel.

‘One down,’ thought Slavo. “Is that it?” he asked, slightly aggravated at all this new information, “I fear that we’re dealing with an impossible mission.”

“No need to despair yet, but there is one more detection system we should be aware of and these are dogs.”

“Dogs? You must be kidding me. All these high tech systems and what you’re worried about is sniffer dogs?” said Slavo disbelievingly.

“Please...never underestimate a dog’s sense of smell. It is by far more sensitive than any manmade device or system on the market. The chemical we use to tag Semtex is immediately picked up by these dogs, way before any of the detection systems can issue a warning,” explained Pavel.

“This may be true, but dogs can be easily distracted. It’s possible to mix in scents that make it difficult for them to concentrate and sniff out the different scents,” claimed Slavo.

“You would be amazed how disciplined sniffing dogs are,” defended Pavel, “they have been conditioned to detect different types of explosives and this is what they do best. Often they will find the suspect substance, although it has been packed together with other much stronger odors to hide its existence. Their smell organ is so sensitive that they can even sniff out a scent from objects that years ago came into contact with a suspect substance,” Pavel’s face relaxed. “However, I agree that they can be distracted and it’s possible to use specific odors that dogs would rather avoid. I experimented with various odors and am happy to say that using miniscule amounts of Skunk liquid works wonders. I can synthesize enough of this chemical composition to infuse the entire Semtex batch and make it safe from sniffer dogs,” said Pavel smilingly. He had tried this experiment with several dogs and every one of them had turned away once their noses came across one of nature’s foulest smelling odors.

“OK, so dogs are off the list as well,” said Slavo content at the news, “but how are you going to avoid detection by all the other systems that are not offended by stinking smells,” argued Slavo.

“I admit it seems like technology has risen to the challenge to face the threat presented by the growing use of plastic explosives around the world...but once in a while, a lab accident creates an innovation that overthrows all the existing rules. I can tell you that one such experiment yielded the solution to our problem.”

“Oh...now that sounds promising,” said Slavo and raised his eyebrows.

“Of course there’s no such thing as a foolproof solution, but I believe that we can rule out all spectrometer based methods and these are the ones

we have to fear most,” said Pavel, “They all work on the same principle of being able to isolate and detect molecules of different shape, weight and charge,” Pavel looked at Slavo to see if he was following his train of thought.

“Go on...,” said Slavo.

“Spectrometers provide a read out of the molecules found in a given sample. Specifically, they will warn you about amino and nitro-based molecules, which are the basis for every explosive...but what if the structure of these molecules is altered? What if the spectrometer cannot map the weight, shape and charge to an amino or nitrate molecule?” he asked Slavo.

“Then it wouldn’t find traces of explosives,” concluded Slavo excitedly.

“Correct,” said Pavel triumphantly, “During one of my lab sessions to create an improved Semtex version, I experimented with several chemical components and compositions. For each of those explosive compositions, I ran a chemical analysis using a spectrometer and one of the test sample read outs didn’t show any traces of amino or nitrate. At first I thought it was an error, so I conducted a second test of this sample, but the results remained the same. I thought the machine was defective, but then I ran the same sample on a different spectrometer and still the same results. I knew I had stumbled upon something very unique and potentially very interesting. My next question was if the composition I created was explosive...according to the chemical analysis, it couldn’t be. Before that, I wanted to know if I could reproduce the same sample. Many times it’s a freak of nature to come up with something that’s so out of the ordinary and no matter how hard you try, you can’t reproduce the same substance. Luckily I had jotted down the right formula...and was able to reproduce the composition and synthesize a large enough sample to do a test explosion. I was still trying to figure out what had happened. Maybe some chemical reaction had altered the chemical structure of the amino and nitrate elements to render the sample useless, but guess what...it remained explosive,” said Pavel with pride in voice.

“But how did the results of the explosion for this sample compare to the other samples?” asked Slavo, “maybe the chemical alteration reduced its effectiveness?”

“No...it showed the same explosive level like all the other test samples with a positive amino and nitrate readout,” explained Pavel.

“Does this mean that you have the formula to create a plastic explosive that cannot be detected?” - This was too good to be true thought Slavo.

“Yes, it means that I can bind RDX and PETN into a composite with a chemically altered molecular structure, which cannot be identified by spectrometers. It still detects the new molecules, but cannot classify them as explosive chemical components.” Pavel nodded with his head to emphasize the importance of his discovery.

Slavo rubbed his chin. “Are you sure about this? I mean...if this is true, your formula might be worth a lot,” said Slavo.

“Only for as long as the spectrometers are not updated with the new molecular structure for a new type of explosive.”

“But it could take several months, if not longer until all devices are up to date. So as long as no one knows what to look for, this new explosive component is operating under stealth mode. Am I correct?” asked Slavo, eager to hear he was right.

“Yes this is correct,” confirmed Pavel.

“Pavel...you might have just earned yourself a fat bonus. It means I can get back to my client and tell him that we have a way to smuggle the product into their country without worrying of getting caught,” said Slavo. He got up from the chair and started to walk around the office. It helped him to think.

“OK...so now we can get the product into the country, but it still leaves you with the challenge to increase the power of the explosive,” reminded Slavo. “Tell me...how're you going to increase the blasting power?” he wanted to know. Of all the questions, this was the most important one. It was the main reason he had chosen Pavel over several other experts.

“The easiest way would be to play around with the PETN and RDX composite ratio. By increasing the percentage of RDX used in the mix, I am certain I'll achieve a substantial improvement. The question though is how much blasting power is needed? Can you give me some guidance?”

“The stronger the better, I can tell you that our customer is dealing with very tough terrain which contains a lot of hard mineral and rock formations. Because of the environmental issue, they would like to reduce the blasting frequency to a minimum and therefore need the strongest possible explosive they can get their hands on,” explained Slavo.

“I understand...there may be another way to increase the explosive power, but it's going to be by far more expensive. It's something I have been working on, but it's still in its experimental stages and I am not sure yet if it will work as expected.”

“Let me hear what you have in mind,” said Slavo eagerly waiting to hear what Pavel had cooked up in his lab.

“Semtex-H has an RE factor of 1.66...”

“RE factor?” interrupted Slavo.

“The RE factor or relative effectiveness factor is a measurement of an explosive's power for military demolitions purposes. It is used to compare an explosive's effectiveness relative to TNT by its weight only. This is so engineers like me can substitute one explosive for another when they are figuring out blasting equations that are designed for TNT. For example, if a timber cutting charge requires 1lb of TNT to work, it would only take 0.6lb of PETN or RDX to have the same effect.”

“So by increasing the RE factor of an explosive composite, you automatically increase its blasting power?” asked Slavo.

“Exactly... the challenge however is to come up with a composition that has a high RE factor and which is stable enough not to explode in your face,” replied Pavel. He was now in his element.

“Ok, I understand,” said Slavo.

“The goal is to increase the RE factor of Semtex-H, which is currently fixed at 1.66. By playing with the PETN and RDX ratio, I might be able to achieve an improvement, but if I want to dramatically increase the RE factor, I would have to add other chemical substances to the mix or even substitute one of the current explosive components that could boost the blasting power.” Pavel lowered his voice before continuing. He wanted to assure that no one was listening in on what he was about to say.

“What I am about to tell you is highly confidential... I have been experimenting with a new explosive I developed. It’s called *Octanitreglycolene* and it’s the most powerful, shock-insensitive high explosive I have come across in my career.”

Slavo looked him in the eyes. “How powerful?” he asked.

“We conducted preliminary tests with micrograms of the explosive and its performance range lies beyond our wildest expectations,” said Pavel with a sparkle in his eyes. “It has a 10 to 12 times greater performance than HMX, the state-of-the-art weapons grade military explosive. We have been synthesizing *Octanitreglycolene* in our laboratory in smaller quantities since the beginning of this year and if the tests confirm our initial findings, we’re going to start a large scale production line. We already prepared a patent application. We can use it for commercial and military grade applications. It’s going to change the way explosives are used today and the military, in particular, is going to run down our door to get their hands on this stuff. Already today we estimate the RE factor to be between 20 and 25, maybe even higher. It is hard to tell without extensive testing, but it’s going to be the strongest explosive to date.”

Slavo tried to conceal his excitement. “This sounds like what we are looking for. Do you think there is a way for you to improve the Semtex composite by adding this new improved explosive?”

“Certainly, I have already set up a series of tests to substitute PETN with up to forty percent of *Octanitreglycolene* or OTG as I like to call it. We will gradually increase the percentage of OTG for as long as the explosive composite remains stable. If we’re lucky we might be able to entirely substitute standard based explosive components with this new and unknown chemical composition. There is just one downside,” remarked Slavo.

“Which is?”

“The high production cost. Production of OTG requires expensive chemicals and the synthesis process for the new composite is very complex. This spikes the overall cost for this new type of explosive. Far higher than the cost to create an explosive that is based on commonly used high explosives.”

“How much more?” asked Slavo.

“I estimate it will increase the selling price by thirty to forty percent at least,” replied Pavel.

Slavo smiled inwardly, this was peanuts. As long as he received the perfect product, the price was irrelevant. “The price will not be the deal breaker here. If Semtex-O can live up to its improved capabilities I will make sure the funds are adjusted,” he confirmed.

“When you adjust your funding you need to take into account that we have to pay off some of the technicians and engineers at Explosan. I will require their assistance to produce a non-tagged Semtex variant that is based on this highly secretive formula. They will have to ignore all the process guidelines and company regulation and are taking a high risk. Apart from losing their job, they could go to prison for violating international laws, but in the end someone needs to manufacture the goods.”

“Sure, that shouldn’t be a problem,” assured Slavo. He liked the way things were going. Pavel was already working on the details and more money wasn’t an issue.

“Also... as we are changing the standard explosive’s composition, it will require some reengineering and testing of the new product and machine set-up process to assure it meets your specs. I can disguise it as applicative engineering or innovative research, but for this my company will charge you extra,” said Pavel. He frowned already, thinking of the obstacle he might have to overcome.

“Everything you asked me for is acceptable,” replied Slavo, “How much in all do you think it will cost us to get the project up and running?”

“All in all you should set aside an additional half a million to be on the safe side.”

Slavo nodded in agreement. “Consider it done,” he said.

Pavel was excited at the Semtex-O opportunity. It would increase the Minex order value by another seven to eight million, for which he would bag an additional four hundred thousand dollars in direct commission. Explosan would immediately jump onto this opportunity, Pavel was sure of that; it presented an opportunity to complete their research backed by a forty million dollar order. However Explosan would have to keep this initial order under wraps, as it currently violated the Geneva conventions, which required each new explosive component to be tested and approved before it could become commercially available. This was to ensure that no inhumane explosive products came to market. A new non-traceable explosive composite surely fell into this category and there was no reason to jeopardize a deal of this magnitude just because the paperwork wasn’t ready yet. Pavel had always mocked the law, as in his opinion there was no such thing as a humane explosive. A human body would always be shredded to pieces if it came in

contact with any form of explosives, so why even try and label it as humane in the first place.

“One more thing, I want the payment in advance. It will be much easier to convince the engineers if I can waive a bundle of cash at their faces,” said Pavel.

“I guess that can be arranged.”

“Good. When my bank confirms the deposit of the funds I can get started,” assured Pavel, “but in light of the high risk I am willing to take, I request you increase my payment to three million dollars.”

Slavo’s expression hardened. “My dear Pavel, don’t get greedy on me. I believe two million is an adequate payment for your services.”

“I would have thought so too...but if you want me to put my life on the line, I must insist you increase my compensation. Call it hazard pay. Anyways you already mentioned a nice fat bonus. You are getting something very unique from me. It is fair to conclude that no one else will be able to provide you with a product that comes close to what I can deliver. You are getting far more than what you expected to be able to get. This I think entitles me to increase my payout,” argued Pavel.

“I don’t believe my client will be too eager to hear about this, but let me find out,” replied Slavo. He took out his cell phone and Pavel asked in astonishment, “Are you going to call them now?”

“Yes, I am, there is no time to waste and they are waiting for my call. This is your last chance to make up your mind. Are you in or out?”

Pavel bit his lower lip. “I’m in. Make the call.”

Pavel felt his hands getting sweaty. He knew he had just agreed to put his life on the line, but consoled himself with the vision of strolling through the grapevines of his own vineyard. Pavel got up and walked over to Slavo. “There is still one more issue we need to discuss,” he said.

“What is it?” said Slavo.

“We receive periodical visits by government inspectors who oversee our production facilities and storage units. They are very observant in their inspection methods and their main objective is to assure we strictly adhere to the law and work according to the imposed guidelines...this is especially true when it comes to marking all of our explosive products with chemical taggants for easy detection.”

“I see...do you know their schedule? When is the next onsite inspection planned?” It was something he had to consider as it could influence the entire timeline.

“The last inspection took place two months ago, but luckily we have a reliable informant in their office who tips us off, whenever they are about to announce themselves unexpectedly. However, this gives us only two to three days max to get the product shipped...This means you must be at all times on standby with your transport to pick up the product whenever I call you.”

“I will make sure all is arranged,” promised Slavo and patted Pavel on the shoulder. “I need you to be ready with the product no later than two months from today.”

Pavel nodded in agreement.

“Good...now that this is settled I wish to have a tour of the compound. I'd like to see how our money is put to use and where you store all your products.” Pavel showed him out the door and together they headed in the direction of the elevators.

* * *

Pavel was abruptly interrupted in his thoughts when his cell phone rang. It took him a second to recollect his thought. He was sitting in his office and going over the recent test results for Semtex-O. It was as he had anticipated. The explosive performed superbly, to the point where it even became scary. The blasting power of Semtex-O was so strong that in the right hands it could bring down an entire building with a single 2.5 kilo brick. The caller ID told him it was Slavo calling.

“Hi, please hold on for a second...” Pavel got up from his desk and walked to the door of his office. He opened the door and looked up and down the corridors to make sure no one was in sight. “You can speak now.”

Slavo laughed ironically “Pavel my friend, you are much too nervous these days...take a drink to relax a bit.”

“I already did...I just want this to be behind me,” he said.

Slavo heard the tension in his voice. “Yes, I understand your concerns, but there is really nothing to worry about. I am calling to let you know that we will pick up the goods tomorrow night.”

Pavel was relieved to hear that, “Excellent...what time is the transport going to be here? I want to prepare the necessary papers to expedite the shipping process. We will only have until about 5 a.m. to complete loading and the truck has to be out of the compound by 5:15 at the latest. I don't want to raise any suspicions and have some overzealous employee double-check the paper work and shipping documents,” he said.

“The transport will arrive at around midnight and I have made sure we bring enough people to help load the goods. The truck will be out of sight before anyone shows up for work the next morning,” assured Slavo.

“I am glad to hear that...there is no room for error here. The inspectors will show up at 7 a.m. sharp and usually they start with a tour of all the storage facilities...So by then there better not be a single trace of Semtex-O.”

Slavo tried to loosen the tense situation. He couldn't afford to have Pavel lose his composure so close to the finish line. “You know what...I myself will come over to oversee the loading of the truck...and by the way, as soon as the truck has left the factory ground, we are going together to Prague to unwind a bit.”

“Thanks, it will really help to have you here...you’re the only one I can trust to make sure it all goes down smoothly.”

Slavo laughed again “Pavel, Pavel all will be over very soon. I also bought you a nice little present to show my personal appreciation for what you have done for me and Minex. You have to keep it together for a little longer...we’re nearly done here,” reminded Slavo, hoping it would cheer up Pavel a little.

6

26 FEDERAL PLAZA

The line forms at sunrise. If you arrive at 26 Federal Plaza after 6:30 a.m., you better be ready to wait in line for a few hours. The building doesn't open until 8 a.m., but the queue already contains a hundred people and there are several hundred more likely to arrive before the security door opens.

This is the modern Ellis Island, the New York headquarters of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, known as INS, and it is an imposing white high-rise just six blocks from Ground Zero, where once the majestic twins of the World Trade Center stretched into the skies of New York. Here people from all nationalities, race and color gather to pursue their dream of becoming a legal citizen of the great American nation. The New York's FBI field office is headquartered in the same building.

John walked up to the gate leading to the main entrance of the building. He didn't have to pass by all the people standing in line. There was a separate entrance only for authorized personnel. He waved his FBI badge at the guard and walked towards the employee entrance. Inside the lobby, four armed guards were on constant duty and John presented his badge to identify himself and then walked through a state-of-the-art metal detector which immediately went off. The guards neglected the alarming sound, knowing he was one of them and waved John through. He continued towards the row of elevators, which only serviced the upper floors that were occupied by the FBI. A crowd of people patiently waited for the elevators to arrive and take them up to their floor of choice. As he was standing and waiting, he heard a female voice call his name.

"John, wait up..." He turned around to see Clair walking up to him holding a large cup of freshly brewed coffee and wearing a big smile on her face. Special agent Clair Hammond was a 31-year-old single who had joined the FBI five years ago to leave a promising career as one of New York's finest to become a federal agent. It didn't fulfill her anymore to bring murderers to justice; it wasn't that she didn't value her job, but she wanted to go after the people that were threatening her country on a daily basis and the FBI or Department of Homeland Security were the authorities handling these threats. She had risen to the rank of detective in a very short time and for the past two years was assigned to the special homicide unit stationed at the 19th precinct in the Upper East Side. She was one of the youngest detectives in the history of the city's police department, which had caused envy among many of her fellow colleagues. Of course it had also helped her to open doors and to provide her with the opportunity to join the ranks of the FBI.

She was a good looking brunette with an athletic figure and average height. She was smart, had excellent instincts and was able to see through all the bullshit coming her way. Her femininity was often mistaken for a weakness when she walked into the interrogation room. Most of the male suspects she questioned thought they could intimidate her with a few harsh phrases and a mean look on their faces, but quickly had to find out the hard way that under this female façade, a tough and fearless cop was residing, who had the verbal and psychological skills to break down the toughest perps. Her male colleagues refrained from messing with her, especially after it became known how she lost control during one of the interrogation sessions, when one of the suspects decided it would be a good idea to grab her ass, which resulted in a broken nose, two missing teeth and three broken ribs. Her colleagues referred to her as a tough cookie with sugar frosting, which was offset by her buoyant personality and positive energy, making everyone at work enjoy her presence.

“Clair...good morning, I see you are already replenishing your caffeine levels.” John gave her an ironic smile.

“In my defense...this is a legal drug, incidentally it happens to share the same chemical group as its illegal cousins,” she responded smilingly.

“I believe it’s a loophole in our judiciary system to get the nation addicted to java so Starbucks can pay a lot of sales tax. People tend to drink coffee to be more productive, but the effect only lasts for a short period, so more coffee is needed to keep up the productivity level, which results in more and more coffee sold. In the end, we work more, which results in more income and corporate taxes and tons of coffee sold. Now isn’t that a real conspiracy?” said John.

“You got a point, but it’s just too early in the morning for me, maybe after I have another cup I’ll be high enough on caffeine to respond to your thesis.” They both chuckled.

The elevator arrived and they took it up to the 34th floor. Of the 41 floors in this building, the FBI occupied the upper 18 floors, the first 23 floors housed the offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service with the Immigration Courtrooms located on the 12th and 14th floors. In total, close to 3,000 people were working for the FBI in its New York field office. It was an army of law enforcement agents working for the various departments including fraud, kidnapping, counter espionage, research & development and counter terrorism, which were spread out across the 18 floors. An entire floor was dedicated to the immense IT infrastructure which acted as a mirror site to the mainframe located at the national FBI headquarters in Washington. Both sites were linked via dedicated landlines and satellite uplinks to allow for full synchronization of the entire data warehouse at every given second. In addition, both data centers were constantly backed up to an offsite storage

facility located at a secret location to comply with Disaster Recovery Program directives and protocols.

Here on the 30th floor, all the gathered information from every FBI field office and from all the different law enforcement agencies was collected, filtered and verified for relevance and then forwarded to the responsible FBI desks for further processing and analysis. The entire data center was linked to the control center, also referred to as the war room, on the 36th floor.

John and Clair exited the elevator and entered into a large open space, which already was bustling with FBI personnel. John stood for a brief moment to take in all the activity around him.

“It still amazes me at what time all these people come to work, don’t they ever sleep?” asked John.

Clair looked at John, “I guess terrorism has rewritten the rules and this also refers to the hours of sleep.”

“Yeah, sadly I must admit you’re right; they operate around the clock and we must try to be a step ahead of them,” he knew that this was hardly the case. The FBI was investing tons of resources to level the playing field and to reach a proactive rather than reactive status quo, but it would take a little longer to achieve this goal.

Clair took a deep breath. “So let’s get moving...can’t waste a minute with those bastards,” she said and off she went in the direction of her desk. All desks were arranged in groups of four to entice interaction among fellow colleagues. This allowed for a seamless flow of information across the entire floor, as everyone could listen into each ongoing discussion, conversation or phone call. Every agent was the bearer of information and incidentally could hold a piece of relevant intel he could contribute and share with his colleagues. It was a very extensive office space, which appeared even larger as there were no separation walls or cubicles to compensate for all the available square footage. The entire office space was equipped with 50” flat panel monitors hanging from the ceiling, which were hooked up to all the news channels or could be individually hooked up to any PC or laptop to project information that needed to be shared with colleagues.

Four glass-walled conference rooms that were referred to as aquariums were evenly spread out throughout the office space. They were sound proof, could seat up to 20 people and were equipped with video conferencing units, individual communications gear and presentation screens for each seat. A first time visitor was likely to be overwhelmed with the sheer space, number of people hectically running around and the noise generated by all the chit- chat, ringing phones, TV screens and electronic equipment.

The FBI’s counter-terrorism task force was located on the 33rd and 34th floors and was home to over 400 agents that were divided into units of four to six members, each specialized in a specific field and focused only on the information range relevant to their scope of work. Within each unit, a team

leader was selected and the teams were deliberately kept small to foster agility, creative freedom and responsiveness to accomplish their task load. Groups of four teams were assigned to a section leader who was in charge of overseeing the information flow and aggregating all the important and classified data from the different teams. In total there were eight sections, which again were clustered into two groups of four and which reported each to a group leader. Lastly, the two group leaders reported to the Director of the Counter-Terrorism Task Force aka DCT. The pyramid setup enabled a bottom up information flow, whereas all the bits of information were efficiently gathered across the widest possible spectrum and which were pushed up the chain of command, undergoing a refinement process at each stage. When they were finally presented to the DCT, it provided him with a clear, cross-referenced and comprehensive picture of all the ongoing threats and activities in his area of responsibility.

Each morning, the DCT gathered his group and section leaders to brief him on the current status of all the running investigations, intelligence updates and threat-risk evaluations. Within five years, John had risen to the rank of section leader, which was a fast paced career for someone with no prior law enforcement background. What he had lacked in knowledge and experience he had made up for through his dedication, commitment and intelligence. He had applied to join the FBI on the second anniversary of Jennifer's death. It had taken him two long years to deal with the loss and pain and on this day he remembered the promise he made standing at her grave and he knew what he had to do. He pulled some strings to get him into the program. He passed the written and oral exam, physical, and psychological assessment, all with flying colors, which qualified him as a candidate. He was sent to Quantico, Virginia, for sixteen weeks of training at the FBI Academy and finished second in his class. His instructors considered him one of the most promising graduates of the program, which covered courses in Law, Behavioral Science, Forensic Science, Leadership Development, Communication, Health/Fitness and Firearms training. The only two disciplines in which he was a complete novice were self-defense and using a firearm, but after he had gotten used to holding a 9mm automatic, he actually had to admit that he liked the feeling. The primary mission of the firearms training unit was to train new Special Agents to become safe and competent with issued handguns, shotguns, and carbines through a comprehensive training program consisting of fundamental marksmanship and combat, survival and judgmental shooting. Apparently John had a hidden talent in efficiently handling firearms, especially as his scores with the 9mm had been extraordinary for a "virgin", as instructors liked to call a first time user.

By the end of the program John had managed to set a new high score for first time users at the academy. He had managed to excel at marksmanship

and combat shooting, but was less accurate on the judgmental side, which he attributed to his inner rage for the loss of his fiancé. He just wanted to get even and somehow visualizing a potential enemy on most of the targets helped him to cope with the pain, but it also resulted in occasionally hitting friendly targets in the process. However, as the days passed, he became calmer and less vengeful with each additional training session and managed to achieve top results in all shooting disciplines, allowing him to graduate as the top rookie in the firearms training program. What had kept him from graduating in top place was his weaker performance in self-defense or hand-to-hand combat training. He knew that he had to greatly improve his skills and decided to join the FBI's martial arts training center in New York once he returned from the academy. His determination paid off and within three years he achieved black belt level status in hand-to-hand combat training. Even Clair, who occasionally sparred with him, was impressed with his much improved fighting skills. John valued her praise, as there were only a very few male colleagues at the Bureau that could actually pin her down in hand-to-hand combat.

John walked over to his desk and looked at the folders piling up on his desk.

“Good morning John,” said John, one of the agents on Angelo DeFranco's team.

“Let's hope so John,” replied John. A few feet to his left, he could see Clair already leaning over a colleague's desk and discussing the data on one of the computer screens. ‘It had been a good decision to promote her to team leader,’ he thought. She had already proven that she had the right stuff to lead her team into action and provide the necessary guidance to successfully complete their missions. John himself had started out six years ago as a team member in one of the units and had made it to team leader within a year. His skill to quickly analyze situations and extract valuable information from potential suspects, together with his ability to properly plan and execute missions and his capacity to effectively lead his team, had made it easy for his superiors to promote him to section leader. He could have already advanced a year ago to group leader, but he wanted to stay in the field and as group leader you were mostly chained to your desk and John wasn't yet ready for that. He was a hands-on guy and wanted to be on the street as much as possible, as this was where the action was and where the enemy was operating in stealth mode. During his years as a team leader, he had managed to successfully break down several extremist groups that were on the verge of becoming safe havens for terror-minded individuals. Worse than that was the fact that Americans were now joining these brotherhoods for the wrong reasons and were trying to channel their political disaffection through these Islamic fundamentalist groups, which made it even more difficult for the Bureau to identify the perpetrators pulling the strings behind the scenes.

John switched on his PC screen and immediately went to check his email. “Eighty-seven unread emails...this is going to be another busy day,” he sighed. The day had just begun and he was already swamped with work. Most of the times, a day’s work was simply not enough to complete the workload on any given day, but who was he to complain, he liked it this way. It kept him on his toes, always pushing him to better himself. John’s section was responsible for analyzing potential threat levels related to the various Islamic brotherhoods and organizations that were continuously growing in numbers and members. It somehow seemed that since 9/11, more US citizens with an Arabic heritage were joining Islamic congregations and brotherhoods to find a support structure with a common background. Life for Moslems living in the US had become more complicated after the days of the attacks. It was a complex situation and it was very difficult, even for the most liberal American groups, not to question the true motives of Moslems living among the population. Not that religious freedom was at any time in jeopardy, it was the fear and uncertainty of knowing that certain individuals were exploiting Islam to disguise their true ambitions, which were too often aligned with the destruction of everything the free world stands for. For the FBI and other authorities, tracking the Muslim population became a matter of national security and it was a constant struggle to weigh the right for freedom against the demand for a safe America.

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